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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KS](#) [KN](#)  
SUBJECT: REPATRIATED NORTH KOREANS' FATE HIGHLIGHTS ROKG'S  
FAILURE ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (SBU) Summary: On February 18, the Grand National Party (GNP) called for an inquiry into whether 22 North Korean's were sent home against their will following unconfirmed reports that they were executed upon repatriation. The National Intelligence Service (NIS) has said publicly that the North Koreans wanted to go home, but activists claim that there was insufficient time between the interdiction of the vessels and the repatriation to accurately determine the individuals' motives. Regardless, the incident could boost support for incoming President Lee Myung-bak's promises to take a harder line on North Korea and emphasize the regime's abysmal human rights record. End Summary.

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The Incident  
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12. (U) On February 15, South Korean authorities spotted 22 North Koreans - eight men and 14 women -- in two vessels off South Korea's Yeonpyeong islands. Press reports quote an unnamed official who said the boats were swept by currents into South Korean waters as they were going to gather clams. North Korean fishermen have often violated the sea border by accident and are usually sent back immediately. This group, however, was picked up by the South Korean Navy for questioning because of the group's size and because there were so many women. The ROK Navy and thQS rQtedly questioned the group and, finding they had no intention of defecting, responded to the North's request for rescue and repatriation. The group was sent back to North Korea via Panmunjom 14 hours after being picked up.

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The Controversy  
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13. (U) On February 17, Yonhap News, a Korean wire service, reported that a North Korean security service had executed all 22 individuals, including three teenagers. The reports prompted the GNP to call for an inquiry into the NIS's actions. NIS officials acknowledged the possibility that the group was executed because of their unauthorized fishing. Officials said the North Koreans boarded the boats illegally while monitoring was lax during the Lunar New Year holidays.

14. (U) Activists claim that there was not enough time

between when the North Koreans were picked up and when they were repatriated for thorough questioning about their intentions. It is widely accepted that North Korean refugees, with their experience of living under repression in the communist country, never say they are defecting unless they are questioned individually in case at least one person in their group returns home and becomes an informant. Additionally, noting North Korean rules prohibiting family members from fishing together, government critics have said the fact that 13 of the group were related makes it likely that their true intention was to defect.

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History  
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¶5. (U) Defections by sea are rare, but by no means unprecedented. Four North Koreans claimed asylum after their wooden vessel drifted onto Yeonpyeong Island in May last year, following the defection of five North Koreans drifting on a small vessel in 2006.

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NGO Viewpoint  
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¶6. (SBU) Joanna Hakmin Kim, of Citizen's Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, told poloff that while there was no way to confirm whether the North Koreans had been executed, the fact that possible refugees had been turned around was regretful and she and her group would continue to protest the ROKG's actions. According to Ms. Kim, few defectors come to South Korea via the sea and one reason for this was the South Korean coast guard was quite strict and often turned back

those who were clearly attempting to defect.

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Comment  
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¶7. (C) The timing of these reports cast further dispersions on Roh Moo-hyun's policies toward the North, and will probably fuel efforts to draw more attention to the human rights situation, an issue many -- including Lee Myung-bak -- feel the ROKG has largely ignored. For its part, the incoming administration has been notably quiet on the fate of the 22 North Koreans, seemingly preferring to leave the debate to the National Assembly. The controversy will likely fade more quickly than it should; North Korea was not much of an issue in the presidential elections and will probably not help candidates make significant gains in the April National Assembly elections. For the South Korean public, however, the incident is one last blemish on Roh Moo-hyun's tenure and his legacy of engagement with North Korea.

VERSHBOW